

In Mali, a Voice for Children and Women

Mariam Diallo-Dramé




Early in her life, Mariam Diallo-Dramé wanted to help others. Moved by the plight of children living on the streets of Bamako, she founded the Children's Parliament of Mali to stand up for children's rights. It was 1994; she was just 13 years old.

"My parents were always a bit surprised by how young I was when I started out, but they always told me to do what I believed was right," the YALI Network member says. Her father, she notes, "refused to have us scarred or married too early," and her mother supported education for all of the children in the family.

By the time she got to university, she wanted to help all young people, especially young women.

Now 34, Diallo-Dramé is married and has three children — and she cherishes the roles of wife and mother. But she has always kept time in her schedule to help people in her community. After receiving a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Montreal and a law degree from the University of Evry Val d'Essonne in France, she returned to Mali to work at a foundation for children.

These women displaced by conflict in 
Mali received training from Change Is
Me.

In 2007, during the run-up to legislative elections in Mali, she provided three women candidates with training on political debates. In 2010, she founded the Association of Women's Leadership and Sustainable Development (AFLED), for which she received a youth medal of merit from the government of Mali in January.


As president of AFLED, Diallo-Dramé works with 50 other volunteers in Bamako and 40 volunteers split between offices in Mopti and Ségou. The team has reached hundreds of women with services related to health, education, entrepreneurship and leadership.

"AFLED stands for a new generation of leaders," she says.

In 2010, Diallo-Dramé and other young African civil society leaders were invited to come to Washington and share with President Obama their views about Africa's potential. She shared her views about the future role of women in Africa and about security in the region.

After that, she joined 16 other members of that group to found "Change Is Me," a project to empower young women displaced by conflict.

"Since the coup d'état in Mali in early 2012 and the conflict in the north of Mali, our focus moved to emergency," she says.

Mariam Diallo-Dramé participates in a  session during her 2014 Mandela Washington Fellowship.


A year later, when Malian and French forces recaptured most of the North from rebels, Change Is Me volunteers asked a group of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the region what type of help they wanted. Diallo-Dramé recalls being struck by one woman's remark: "We want to work to live decently. We don't want to be seen as IDPs but [as] Malian — common people," the woman said.

Change Is Me assisted the displaced women in several ways. It provided counseling, skills training in local languages so the women could earn incomes, and small grants so they could start or restart a business.

Diallo-Dramé says she appreciates the networking opportunities the YALI Network provides. "Being part of this incredible network ... [members] have no reason not to be proactive or engaged."


"This experience [with the network] is incredible. It has changed my life forever and given me more confidence to stand up for liberty, democracy and development," she says.

Men and Boys Stand for Gender Equality

A family celebrates their happiness in  Malawi.

"To all the men ... I have a simple message. We need you to shake things up. Too often, women are fighting these battles alone, but men like you, progressive men who are already ahead of the curve on women's issues, you all are critically important to solving this problem."

— First lady Michelle Obama

Women proudly display their voting  finger after casting a ballot in the 2013 Mali presidential election.


"If every man took responsibility for himself, this alone would be enough to end violence against women and girls."

— U.N. Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson

Men and boys around the world are taking a stand for gender equality. Yet full-scale equality between women and men is yet to be achieved.

As the United Nations considers setting the next global development goals, “there is unprecedented opportunity” to quicken the pace to achieve universal gender equality, according to the U.N.’s HeForShe campaign.

Launched in September 2014 at U.N. headquarters in New York, HeForShe wants men and boys to recognize that they can play a significant role in ending the global, persisting inequality that women and girls face. “The campaign challenges men to recognize that gender equality is a human right and a social and economic imperative” that will benefit all people. It aims to show men and boys how gender equality can liberate both women and men from “prescribed social roles and stereotypes,” the campaign states.

Universal access to education is a  hallmark of gender equality.

HeForShe uses social and other media, arts and pop culture to build understanding of perceived and real equality. The U.N. campaign reaches out to men online and offline and asks them to “sign up” to raise awareness of gender discrimination and to advocate for action. It asks them to note on the campaign’s website mentions of [HeForShe](#) in social media, online conversations, media interviews, resources and collaborations. The campaign provides action kits to individuals and to corporate, university and nongovernmental partners explaining how to plan and implement local gender-equality awareness activities.


Paramount Chief Kyungu of Malawi and Gilberto Macuacua, a media personality in Mozambique and a member of the U.N. Women Regional Civil Society Group, have signed on as male supporters of HeForShe, calling on other men to follow suit.

“The cultural leaders in Malawi have been on the forefront of discouraging cultural practices that infringe on the rights of women, such as early marriages, and will continue to do so,” Kyungu said.

Macuacua added: “The media is a powerful tool in shaping opinion, and I use the TV programme of Homem que é Homem (Men That Are Real Men) as well as my [blog](#) to talk about issues of gender equality and fighting violence against women.”

Another HeForShe effort is its one-year Impact 10x10x10 program. The program aims to partner with 10 governments, 10 corporations and 10 universities to identify and test various approaches to ending gender inequality.

Youth are a particular focus of HeForShe outreach. “The current generation of youth is better positioned and has more opportunities than previous ones to help shape development, with greater access to information, technology, education and training,” the campaign states, noting that roughly half of the world’s population is under age 30.

These two secondary school students  received the U.S. Agency for International Development's "Wings to Fly" scholarship. Both girls want to become entrepreneurs.


"Men and boys can prevent violence against women and girls by being conscientious about and changing their own attitudes, values and behaviors towards women and girls, and by ensuring that they do not personally engage in discrimination or violence," U.N. Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson said at the launch of HeForShe. "Where violence has already been perpetrated, men can take the initiative to change their behavior so that they do not commit violence again," the actress said.

Further, men and boys can be proactive by intervening when they witness discrimination or violence by other men and boys, Watson said. They can voice disapproval when peers make sexist, degrading or derogatory remarks. They can support friends to make respectful choices, like not making sexual advances to a woman who is intoxicated. And if they see violence, they can directly intervene after determining that no further harm will come to the woman or themselves, or contact appropriate authorities such as the police.

"If every man took responsibility for himself, this alone would be enough to end violence against women and girls," Watson said.

Learn about more ways to get involved at yali.state.gov/16days.

Eight Ways to Stop Violence Against Women

Villagers listen to Thierry Kajeneza and a colleague speak about human rights. 

[Thierry Kajeneza](#) grew up witnessing the mistreatment of women and girls. To him, this mistreatment was not only a violation of their human rights but also a missed opportunity to include women and girls in Burundi's post-civil war reconstruction.

In 2007, the YALI Network member took action. Kajeneza and his colleague established [ICIRORE C'AMAHORO](#), a Ngozi province-based group that advocates for the rights of women and girls. Below, Kajeneza shares eight ways communities can stop violence against women and achieve gender equality:

- Create laws and enforce existing laws that protect women from discrimination and violence, including rape, beatings, verbal abuse, mutilation, torture, "honor" killings and trafficking.

- Educate community members on their responsibilities under international and national human rights laws.
- Promote the peaceful resolution of disputes by including the perspectives of women and girls.
- Strengthen women's ability to earn money and support their households by providing skills training for women.
- Sensitize the public to the disadvantages of early and forced child marriages.
- Highlight the value of girls' education and of women's participation in economic development.
- Encourage women to participate in the political process and educate the public about the value of women's votes.
- Raise public awareness of the poor conditions some women face, particularly in rural areas.

Learn more about YALI Network members [Kajeneza](#) and [Thierry](#) work with the Man Up campaign on our blog.

Learn about more ways to get involved at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end Gender-Based Violence in your community.

Man Up to Stop Violence Against Women: Uganda

"Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse and cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography."

— Man Up Campaign

James Byarugaba



While a student at Makerere University in Kampala, James Byarugaba began to learn about gender and human rights. He discovered that "the cost of gender inequality is huge" and made a commitment to raise awareness about the value of equality.

In 2010, Byarugaba learned about the [Man Up](#) campaign, a collaboration of the Clinton Global Initiative and Vital Voices Global Partnership. At the group's youth summit in Johannesburg that year, he met other youth who shared his commitment to equality and to ending violence against women and girls. "I realized I was not fighting alone," says the 33-year-old, who also serves as a lecturer in project planning and management at Makerere.

Byarugaba has put his commitment to work through the nonprofit group Youth Alive Uganda. He says Youth Alive has been successful at ending violence against women in communities they work in

because it:

- Incorporates gender into all its programs, which include skills development and health care.
- Started peer support groups for young people. About 100 groups with 50 members each meet with parents' associations, teachers, religious leaders and men's and women's groups around the country to talk about the benefits of gender equality. "Working with community men's groups has helped reduce sexual and physical violence against women," Byarugaba says.
- Promotes gender equality and an end to gender-based violence to school officials. That has resulted in some schools adopting child protection policies, providing separate toilets for girls and boys, and, in some instances, changing rooms and sanitary pads for girls.
- Provides teen-oriented prenatal sessions where young mothers can share their experiences and challenges.
- Partners with local institutions and governmental bodies to mobilize logistical and financial support for gender equality efforts.

Members of the Man Up campaign in Uganda get the message out.



"My vision is one world ... where boys and girls and men and women have the same opportunities and are empowered to contribute equally in shaping the world they want," Byarugaba says. "My vision is of a violence-free world where no human being owns the other or inflicts harm based on one's gender."


Learn about more ways to get involved at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end Gender-Based Violence.

Man Up to Stop Violence Against Women: Burundi

"Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse and cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography."

— Man Up Campaign

Thierry Kajeneza grew up witnessing women and girls being raped, forced into prostitution and sent out alone to collect water and firewood and to look for food.

Thierry Kajeneza, front center, and a  colleague tell rural women in Burundi about their rights.

“I saw how women were not invited like men to speak out about their problems and about what they could contribute to the construction of Burundi” after a long civil war, Kajeneza, a 35-year-old human rights activist and YALI Network member, recalls.

That impression pushed Kajeneza and a colleague to establish [ICIRORE C’AMAHORO](#) in 2007. The Ngozi province-based group advocates for human rights, especially for women and girls. It wants to help young people avoid the mistakes of previous generations and learn to become leaders.

ICIRORE C’AMAHORO, which means “mirror of peace” in Kirundi, reaches out to young women and men to help spread its messages to the wider public. It runs youth clubs in schools throughout the country and started a youth camp. It organizes gatherings that give young men and women opportunities to talk about gender issues. And it encourages women to form support networks and learn financial skills.

The organization’s strategy includes finding opportunities in the community where husbands and wives can work together to make decisions, then discuss why each decision was made. That encourages “a safe environment for women to express themselves and allows both husbands and wives to recognize the power of working together ... in the workplace, at home and in the community,” Kajeneza says.

Kajeneza notes that Burundi’s national and local governments have “responded positively” to ICIRORE’s work. Local authorities help inspire residents to attend ICIRORE’s meetings and training sessions. The national government gave ICIRORE the land on which it is constructing offices.

The international community also has responded. In 2010, the civil rights advocate was invited to the Man Up Young Leaders Summit in Johannesburg. A collaboration of the Clinton Global Initiative and Vital Voices Global Partnership, the [Man Up](#) campaign motivates youth to help stop violence against women and girls and advance gender equality.

Kajeneza follows the YALI Network on Facebook and says he likes “knowing other young people who are involved in many domains of leadership.” He advises members to use social media to share information about what they are doing to end violence against women.

“This issue of gender violence will be solved if we all stand together. ... The world will become a village where men and women will live in harmony,” Kajeneza says.

Take your pledge today for how you will help end violence against women and girls in your communities at yali.state.gov/4her.


Create Opportunities, Take Others Along

By Edda Zekarias, Addis Ababa

At the 24th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in January, the AU heralded 2015 as the Year of Women's Empowerment and Development toward Africa's Agenda 2063.

We speak the same language

Speaking to 500 young Africans attending the inaugural summit of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders last summer, U.S. first lady Michelle Obama passionately asked for youth's best efforts to change the disheartening plight of many girls and women in Africa who often, and not by choice, miss out on opportunities.

More than 5,000 women participated in  Ethiopia's 2015 Women First run to mark International Women's Day on March 8.

"This is where Africa's future lies — with those women-run businesses, with those girls attending university, and with leaders like you who are making their dreams possible. And the question today is how all of you and young people like you will steer Africa's course to embrace that future," Obama said.

Not long before that, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, chair of the African Union Commission, had a similar message. "We need much greater commitment and action to empower women and girls in the process of eradicating hunger, poverty and promoting development. Furthermore, there is need to give special attention to increasing the participation of women in decision-making in all areas of life, as a means of improving the quality of decision-making ... including in the protection of the environment and wildlife."

March 8, International Women's Day, is celebrated the world over. Sadly, for many girls and women, opportunities are far from within reach. Their battles in every aspect of life — at work, school or home — are silent and painful. Imagine that every single mistake or bad thing that happens in a family becomes blame thrown at a female family member. Will younger female members of that family be treated with respect and dignity as they mature into adulthood? How will their self-esteem be high enough so they can be confident and competitive?

"At the current pace, it will take 81 years to achieve gender parity in economic participation, and some 50 years to reach parity in parliamentary representation," [U.N. Women](#) reports.

Hope


Yet, there is hope. We have each other. We also have strong support from the men who understand us.

"A truly strong, powerful man isn't threatened by a strong, powerful woman," the first lady said.

In an opinion piece published on International Women's Day, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said, "While their work may not always make the front pages, women are confronting our most pressing global issues. At great personal risk, they are fighting poverty, discrimination and violence so that their families, communities and countries can have better lives."

"I see the power of women every day in every country that I visit," he said.

This year, sustainable development goals (SDGs) will build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were about quantity. SDGs will enhance quality. [MDG3](#) set out to "promote gender equality and empower women." [SDG5](#) will push efforts to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."

Runners reach the finish line at 
Ethiopia's 2015 Women First run on
International Women's Day March 8.

Including women in decision-making can double if not triple a nation's economic and human development. This is true here in Africa.

At the International Conference on the Emergence of Africa held in Abidjan in March, UNDP chief [Helen Clark](#) proposed a way forward for Africa. "By reducing inequalities, African countries will lift human development and will harness the full potential of women and currently marginalized groups to contribute to development," she said.

Much remains to be done. Whatever comes of these efforts, women who are able will play a key role in bringing other young girls and women along. So what will our revised route for the better be?


"If you keep positive and optimistic about what can be done, [things] do work out," said former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

For my part I pledged on [#Africa4Her](#) to work in partnership with my alma mater, Addis Ababa University, to help young women students build confidence and set goals for while they are at school and later in the workplace. I will help them gain access to a network of pioneering professional women with whom they can talk about the challenges they face. This will help them begin to develop internship opportunities and long-term mentor relationships.

[From Factory Worker to Girls' Education Champion](#)

"Today we transform communities. Tomorrow we create the next generation of female leaders."

— Kennedy Odede, founder of Shining Hope for Communities

Students surround Kennedy 
Odede and Jessica Posner

Odede.

With just 20 cents in savings, a soccer ball and no formal education, factory worker Kennedy Odede started the education nonprofit [Shining Hope for Communities](#) (SHOFCO) in the largest slum in Africa.

Odede, now 30, is a YALI Network member. Saying he was motivated by “the entrepreneurial spirit” of his neighbors in the Nairobi slum of Kibera, where more than 1 million people live in an area the size of New York City’s Central Park, Odede has become one of Africa’s best-known community organizers and social entrepreneurs.

SHOFCO aims to combat gender inequality and extreme poverty in urban slums by making girls’ schools catalysts of social change. “Our schools for girls serve as a long-term investment in transformative leadership. ... Tomorrow, our girls will become next-generation leaders disrupting the systems that hold poverty in place,” the organization states.


SHOFCO’s core services are tuition-free education for girls and free health care, food and psychological services for residents of Kibera and Mathare, a separate collection of slums in Nairobi. It also provides these communities with affordable clean water and modern latrines.

Odede’s group begins to support girls from before they start school to when they complete university and begin careers. He recalls one particular girl that SHOFCO’s Kibera School for Girls helped transition from adversity to success.

One Girl’s Life Blooms

Pauline was 12 when she came to the school. Exposed to the traumas of civil unrest and the loss of her mother two years earlier, Pauline had underdeveloped physical and social abilities. So she was enrolled in a pre-kindergarten class. But over time, with the help of SHOFCO teachers and counselors, the young teen improved her hand-eye coordination, verbal communication and reading comprehension skills. She is now a proficient reader, a “wonderful writer” and more self-assured when she is around others, Odede says. She also excels in math, science and social studies.

“A positive environment and a quality education has contributed to a vastly growing confidence that has inspired Pauline’s dream of becoming a school manager,” he adds.

Kennedy Odede and one  of the students of the SHOFCO Kibera School for Girls.

“Education is the greatest tool for women’s empowerment. It gives girls the tools to confront the challenges of the world [and] is the greatest way to give girls confidence,” Odede says.

Odede credits his mother — “denied an education and was still just a girl when I was born” — with inspiring him to fight for gender equality through education. Often beaten by her husband, his mother “taught me how to take care of other people and to take action to bring change. ... My mother taught me to believe in the power of education,” he says.

SHOFCO involves the whole community in building new generations of empowered and healthy women, offering students' mothers, fathers and brothers such opportunities as access to economic empowerment programs, adult literacy classes and youth sports teams. "Empowering women has always been about working from the grass roots. If you do not engage the entire community, including men, the change never lasts," Odede says.

With more than 160 employees — from teachers, to doctors and nurses, to case workers and data collectors — "SHOFCO is a movement that transforms urban poverty to urban promise," he says.

New Partner and New Funding


Three years after Odede started SHOFCO, Jessica Posner, an American student of African-American studies, came to work at the organization and developed a strong bond with the community. Odede says that relationship "is something to be emulated — how people from different cultures can work together to fight poverty and gender equality."

Odede continues to operate SHOFCO and has expanded its funding base to include grants from the Newman's Own, Ford, General Electric, Pentair and Starkey Hearing foundations, Chime for Change, the Clinton Global Initiative and Barclays Bank, as well as donations from thousands of individuals every year. The organization plans to start operating in more urban slums and serve as a model for African leaders who want to start similar ventures in their communities.

Odede believes that with education, the best way to create more women leaders is by bringing in successful women to mentor girls.

"Today we transform communities. Tomorrow we create the next generation of female leaders," Odede says.

Everyone Has a Role to Play

For three days, from March 24th through 26th, Alvin Allgood engaged with the YALI Network  in a #YALICHAT on the issues, obstacles that have kept women and girls from educational opportunities, and the ability to develop professionally. The Vital Voices chief operating officer brought his expansive and informed view of the issue to the YALI Network as part of the March focus on investing in women and girls. In responding to questions and comments from the YALI Network, he also discussed ideas and solutions for creating real change that will allow women and girls to "achieve their full potential."

Read his blog on empowering women and girls [here](#).

Several questions from Network members acknowledged the entrenched prejudices and stereotypes that have prevented women and girls from playing a role in society. Questions and comments noted

the resistance to educational opportunity and gender bias, particularly among men. In response to one post, Allgood stated that, "Changing culture takes time, and educating all youth is key to long term progress. It would also be useful to look at examples from other neighboring communities as learning lessons for how they have dealt with gender stereotypes."

But many Network members admitted that men are important to changing this attitude and that it is not up to women alone. Allgood remarked that, "As a father it is my duty to ensure that my son and daughter grow up respecting all of human kind. I am happy to see the younger generations being more and more color and gender blind. Women can inspire men and they often times do. Men should not be threatened by womens rights but accepting and bold to stand alongside them."

As one Network member put it, "It is the duty of everyone, including men in sound positions to create a platform and investment for the education and empowerment of women. We owe it our women and humanity at large."

Creating opportunities for women entrepreneurship was another area of interest for Network members. Many identified this as critical to your community's and country's economic health. Allgood agreed. "Through our work at Vital Voices, we have found that despite the proven benefits of women's economic engagement, women business owners still face disproportionate barriers. As the future leaders of the continent, I encourage you to advocate for women's economic empowerment in your communities. It is not only right, it is also smart economics."

In signing off from his #YALICHAT, Allgood had praise and a further challenge for the YALI Network.


"Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this [#YALICHAT](#). Your comments and questions have inspired me, and I hope that my responses have done the same. Collaborating and networking are critical to affecting real change. Collectively we can make a difference. We have been reminded this week that words alone are not enough and that we have to be willing to take bold steps. As you make this pledge to invest in women and girls, be sure to invite your fellow network members and think about what you can achieve together."

[#Africa4Her: Ten Exemplary Pledges to Invest in Women and Girls](#)


This March, YALI Network members have made the commitment to invest in women and girls in Africa, not only to help achieve gender equality, but also to promote economic growth, good governance, and future innovation. Women and girls are often the foundation of a community, and it is essential that they are given the same opportunities as men for that nation to grow. More than 700 YALI Network members pledged to invest in women and girls, and many of these pledges have

already been put into action. Below is just a sample of the amazing and creative pledges that were made this month.

1. Leadership development training for 25 Cameroonian women; create Young Women's Advocacy Network:

Patience Agwenjang from Cameroon pledges to organize a six-month leadership development training course for 25 women and to create the Young Women's Advocacy Network to support effective policy on gender issues and good governance. 

2. Mentor young female victims of human trafficking in Nigeria:

Lawrenta Igoh from Nigeria pledges to mentor girls who have been victims of human trafficking by organizing training sessions on reproductive health and life-building skills to help prepare them to adjust to society and decrease their vulnerability to being re-trafficked. 


3. Feature business women in an entrepreneurship magazine:

Mothibedi Sereme from South Africa pledges to help young women through a local entrepreneurship magazine that he publishes by featuring articles and bios on successful female entrepreneurs. He will also host a seminar on leadership and higher education for young women at which inspiring businesswomen will speak to girls about their role in the economy and the importance of education.


4. Empower young women through poetry:

Mercedes Leburu pledges to help empower other young women in South Africa to become confident and lead a liberated lifestyle through writing poetry that will boost their self-esteem.

5. Educate young girls about protected sex and how to grow produce successfully:

Noel Lutomia in Kenya pledges to help young women start small income-generating projects, such as small crop farming, that would earn them independence from men and decrease their vulnerability to sexual predators. 

6. Help girls continue their education by providing sanitary napkins:

James Obare Ondongo from Kenya pledges to help increase the chances for girls' education in two primary schools by distributing sanitary napkins so girls can attend school regularly during their monthly cycles. 

7. Organize art workshops to help women network and empower them through their own creativity:

Kunle Adewale from Nigeria pledges to invest in women by holding workshops with a focus on therapeutic art and vocational skills. The art produced at these workshops will be publicly displayed and put up for auction, with the profits going directly back to the women and girls who participate.

8. Hold a conference for young women in business to expand their

horizons and share ideas:

Nathacia Oliver from South Africa pledges to initiate the first “Young Women Thrive” business conference, where young female entrepreneurs can gather to network and collaborate on new and exciting business ideas.

9. Tutor female classmates in a course:

Samuel Ndhlovu from Zambia pledges to assist two of his classmates in a course that he is doing well in by tutoring them three days a week.


10. Organize a training workshop for women in small-scale dairy production:

Khalid Ngassa from Tanzania pledges to organize and host a four-day training workshop for women who run small-scale dairy production operations as a part of the Nronga Women’s Dairy Cooperative Society. He will teach them about business efficiency and how to maximize their profits using their available resources.

What Role Will You Play?

By: Alvin Allgood

I am proud to have this opportunity to engage with you all and look forward to our #YALICHAT on investing in women and girls.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating  officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience.

Everyone has a role to play when it comes to investing in women and girls. I believe that your generation has already made a mark. You’re known for your curiosity, creativity and refusal to accept systems that no longer work. You see problems and you fearlessly work to create solutions. You use technology to relate in ways we couldn’t have imagined even 10 years ago. You aren’t bound by convention, and you’re not satisfied with just accumulating wealth or power. Maybe more than any generation that’s come before you, you’re motivated to contribute to the larger social good — to do well while doing good.

It’s this motivation that convinces the rest of us that you will improve on the world you’re inheriting, and solve some of the biggest problems we face.

This month the world turns its attention to one of the greatest challenges of our time: the universal

inequality that keeps women and girls from achieving their full potential. Each March on International Women's Day, global organizations, national officials and local leaders recommit to investing in solutions that work. At Vital Voices, this is what we do each and every day.

For more than 18 years, Vital Voices has been investing in women leaders who improve the world. We find women who have a vision for a better world and demonstrate leadership that unites and inspires others. Then we partner with them to help make that vision a reality.


We work with leaders in three key areas: human rights, economic opportunity, and political and public leadership. These women are in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

We make long-term investments in each leader and design programs that offer practical skills and services. We connect them with expert advisers for mentoring and collaboration, and support them in telling their stories and sharing their perspectives.

Together, these interventions increase a leader's capacity and expand her access to opportunity. They enable a leader to accelerate the impact she is having on the ground, realize her vision, and improve not just her community, but the world beyond.

As a member of the YALI Network, you're linked to more than 130,000 of your peers. You're part of a community with the potential to educate, motivate and have a lasting impact — both online and off.

I know firsthand the power of a network like yours. Throughout my career, I've seen what a determined group of leaders can achieve when they work together toward a shared goal. Before joining Vital Voices, I spent more than 20 years in the education sector innovating, improving and expanding educational services to prevent dropouts and create solutions around problems that have put our youth at risk. This was only possible through collaboration.

Through his work with Vital Voices,  Allgood is helping to create a global network of women leaders.

What we see every day at Vital Voices is that real leadership leads to collective empowerment. Every woman leader we invest in makes it her mission to reinvest in the rising generation. By sharing access, information and opportunity, the women we partner with are empowering other women and girls. It's this collaboration and cycle of impact that improves communities around the world.

When you consider making a pledge to invest in women and girls, look first to your fellow network members and think about what you can achieve together.

As you work to strengthen and expand your various entrepreneurial ventures, I urge you to leverage the networks and technology you have available to make ambitious pledges to empower the women and girls in your communities.

I look forward to reading your comments and answering any questions you have during the #YALICHAT.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience, particularly in the education sector. Mr. Allgood is a veteran of the U.S. Army and has earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and public relations as well as a master's degree in organizational management.
